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Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists

Volume 33 | Number 2 Article 9

2016

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Hoarding and Its Effects on Acquisition and Appraisal: Two Case Studies from the University of Illinois Archives

Cover Page Footnote
I would like to thank University Archivist, William Maher, and Assistant University Archivist, Christopher Prom at the University of Illinois Archives. Their support throughout my time as a GA, along with their patience with my tagging along in these case studies, has led to much professional development and growth, of which I am eternally grateful. I would also like to thank my parents for their unending support.

This article is available in Provenance, Journal of the Society of Georgia Archivists: https://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/provenance/vol33/iss2/9

Hoarding and Its Effects on Acquisition and Appraisal: Two Case Studies from the University of Illinois Archives

Roxanne M. Dunn

Introduction

In the late 2000s, compulsive hoarding was brought to the attention of mainstream America with the airing of two reality television series, *Hoarders* on the A&E channel and *Hoarding: Buried Alive* on the TLC channel. In fact, the series premiere of *Hoarders* on August 17, 2009, was watched by 2.5 million total viewers, becoming one of the most watched series premiere in network history.[1] These reality television series depicted the challenges and attempted treatment of people who suffer from compulsive hoarding disorder and fascinated viewers in the process. While awareness of this disorder has begun to grow in the public eye over the last five years, compulsive hoarding and its aftermath continue to be a difficult problem for archivists making retention decisions of historically important materials.

Compulsive hoarding is characterized by the acquisition of and failure to discard a large number of possessions and clutter that prevent the use of living spaces as intended.[2] Often these items are unsanitary, worthless, or hazardous.[3] Hoarding is a serious form of psychopathology associated with significant health and safety concerns, as well as a source of social and economic burden.[4] Acquiring materials from hoarders poses significant challenges to archivists who rely in part on the retention decisions of creators and collectors. Trying to determine what merits acquisition can be an overwhelming process for most archives, which are often understaffed, overcommitted, and lacking in adequate resources.

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[1] A&E Network, "A&E'S New Series 'Hoarders' Becomes Most-Watched Series Premiere in Network History Among Adults 18-49 and Ties for the Most in 25-54," news release, August 18, 2009.

[2] Randy Frost, Alla Pekareva-Kochergina, and Sarah Maxner, "The Effectiveness of a Biblio-based Support Group for Hoarding Disorder," *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 49 (2011): 628-634.

[3] Ibid.

[4] David F. Tolin, Randy O. Frost, Gail Steketee, Krista D. Gray, and Kristin E. Fitch, "The Economic and Social Burden of Compulsive Hoarding," *Psychiatry Research*, 160 no. 2 (2008): 200-211.

It is quite plausible that traditional appraisal theories will not be applicable when appraising materials from these types of environments. Clearly, the theoretical framework that places archivists as mere "keepers" of records will not work with records creators who suffer as compulsive hoarders. In that instance, archives will end up keeping a lot of garbage, literally. Schellenberg's once popular theories of primary and secondary values are difficult to apply as well. Oftentimes when searching for records in a hoard, it is impossible to tell exactly where records of "evidential" and "informational" value may be located. Perhaps the best an archivist can hope for in matching an appraisal theory with a practical purpose regarding materials from a hoard would be an attempt to create a "representative record" of the creator's experience, similar to a simplified documentation strategy.[5] By attempting to locate materials beyond simply a creator's "official" records, a better job will be done of capturing the substance of the creator. After all, a hoarder's original order can be very difficult for an archivist to determine or make available.

The two cases studies presented in this article occurred during 2011 to 2012 when I was working as a graduate assistant at the University of Illinois Archives (Archives) while completing a Master's degree in Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Established in 1963, the Archives includes more than 25,000 cubic feet of office records, publications, and personal papers from the University and the Urbana-Champaign campus.[6] The Archives employs a combination of ten full-time faculty members and professional staff.[7]

The first hoarded environment I visited as a graduate assistant forced me to realize how underprepared we were. When I had the opportunity to visit a second hoarded environment, roughly a year later, the Archives was much better prepared to handle acquiring materials from this type of situation. My hope is other archival repositories, especially smaller ones with limited resources, can benefit from the Archives' experiences with these two instances and

[5] Frank Boles, Selecting and Appraising Archives and Manuscripts (Chicago: The Society of American Archivists, 2005), 18.
[6] "About Us," University of Illinois Archives: Bringing History to Life, accessed July 21, 2015, http://archives.library.illinois.edu/about-us/.
[7] Ibid.

use the steps listed in this article to better acquire and care for collections from hoarded environments.

As psychologists continue to study and understand compulsive hoarding as a unique disorder, archivists can use and apply their findings when working to make retention decisions. These findings can also help archivists understand the methods of hoarders who are either deceased or unable to participate in the transfer of their materials.

This paper addresses the challenges that hoarded environments present for archivists and will share steps taken by myself and other professional archivists at the University of Illinois to filter through two hoards. Included is a list of supplies and materials other archivists may find useful if confronted with acquiring materials from this type of environment.

The Challenges for Archivists

It is well documented that appraisal and acquisition are two of the most important yet challenging aspects of an archivist's job. The essence of appraisal is a subjective judgment on the value of documents. Appraisal is still primarily a decision based on the archivist's knowledge, experience, and instinct.[8] For many years, archivists have debated their role as appraisers rather than just record retainers, as active collectors versus passive amassers.[9] For these reasons, it is obvious why archivists have struggled with determining what to keep. Throughout the last century, archivists have reevaluated many collecting and appraisal concepts. According to Leah Broaddus' article "From White Gloves to White Coats: A Call for Partnership between Archivists and Hoarding Psychologists," the fundamental building blocks of those concepts are the shared social/psychological ideas of the communal value of objects, the biases of record retainers and organizers, the nature of the future human need for records, and the past experience of archivists with

[8] William J. Maher, *The Management of College and University Archives* (Lanham, Maryland and London: The Society of American Archivists and The Scarecrow Press, 1992), 37.

[9] Leah Broaddus, "From White Gloves to White Coats: A Call for Partnership between Archivists and Hoarding Psychologists," *Archival Issues*, 32 no. 1 (2010): 23-24.

the completeness or incompleteness of the historical record.[10]

Attempting to acquire materials from a hoarded environment makes the tasks of appraisal even more complex for the archivist. In hoards, archivists are faced with time constraints, materials badly damaged by pests or mold, and extreme levels of disorganization. In terms of time constraints, decisions about retention often must be made quickly, as demolition or extreme cleaning of the space may be imminent. Plus, materials may be deteriorating and it is best to remove them from that environment as quickly as possible. The ability of an archivist to assess a situation and mentally "take stock" of where historically important materials might be located in a hoard is essential, and often is a skill which unfortunately becomes honed with repetition. When facing extraordinarily cluttered environments, it can be helpful to have the guidance of cooperative creators or executors, along with a plan for acquisition. The sheer amount of materials can intimidate the most seasoned archivists and having some basic guidance can be helpful in identifying places where creators produced their records throughout the hoard.

While appraising materials badly damaged by mold, water, or pests, it is also imperative for archivists to be pragmatic. Before entering the hoard, an archivist should have a realistic expectation of what and how many resources are available for this specific acquisition. Larger institutions may benefit from in-house conservation labs and digital preservation units, while others may have to rely on outsourcing conservation treatments. Underfunded institutions may be unable to take any badly damaged items if no resources exist to care for them. By being sensible and realistic about their institution’s ability to care for badly damaged materials, archivists will be able to work through the hoard quickly and efficiently.

It is also important for archivists to remain unemotional when entering a hoarded environment with the intent of appraising and acquiring materials. The magnitude of some hoards can be overwhelming and the desire to save as many materials as possible can negatively affect appraisal decisions. Seeing how a person was reduced to living in unsanitary or unsafe conditions can cloud the overall mission of the archivist. It is crucial for archivists not to

[10] Ibid.

become paralyzed when staring down literal mountains of potential records. A calm demeanor along with reliable information from donors or executors and a well-constructed plan will help archivists from becoming emotionally overwhelmed at the thought of trying to save everything or walking away and taking nothing at all.

As Broaddus explains, "In hoarding psychology, as in archives, it is a matter of weighing the frequently overlooked costs of saving against the potential retrospective costs of discarding."[11] These are the considerations that archivists must anticipate when attempting to acquire historically important materials from a hoard.

Case Study One

In fall 2011, the University of Illinois Archives was contacted by a department on campus to appraise the materials of a deceased professor employed by the University for close to 45 years, first in his office and eventually at his home. The materials eventually accessioned, processed, and made available included: curriculum vitae and biographical materials; professional activities including conference and conventions attended; an administrative subject file; correspondence with colleagues, publishers, and students; manuscripts; publications; course materials; tape recordings of interviews with filmmakers; and personal papers.

This case proved to be moderately problematic for the Archives. Materials in the office were not physically damaged by pests or environmental concerns, but were disorganized with no apparent original order. Journals, books, tapes, and films were stacked from floor to ceiling. Three filing cabinets were overstuffed to the point it was difficult to open the individual drawers. Upon entering the office, it was impossible to tell that a desk existed underneath large amounts of papers, notepads, and additional journals. Sorting through these materials to determine what to accession was time consuming. When I began working in the office, it was a nine on the Clutter Image Rating Scale, a scale developed by four psychologists to assess compulsive hoarding and severity of clutter.[12]

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[11] Broaddus, "From White Gloves to White Coats: A Call for Partnership between Archivists and Hoarding Psychologists," *Archival Issues*, 32 no. 1 (2010): 24.
[12] "Clutter Image Rating Scale," International OCD Foundation About Hoarding, Tests for Hoarding, accessed July 23, 2015,

A family member invited the Archives to visit the deceased professor's home where research, class, and organization files were also stored. The home was in an advanced state of hoarding and scheduled for demolition within the coming weeks. I visited the home with the Assistant University Archivist and it quickly became clear that we were inadequately prepared as an archival repository to react to this hoard.

First, the timing proved challenging. The family allowed us two opportunities to visit the home; we were only able to gain entry into the home on the second visit. Large holes in the roof of the home had repeatedly leaked water over several years, which caused mold and rust on filing cabinets, household furniture, and appliances. Pests and wildlife also entered the home this way. Many items suffered mold damage, although none of the materials selected for acquisition had evidence of mold. In addition to the holes in the roof, the plumbing did not function and there was no longer electricity. In terms of the Clutter Image Rating Scale, the house was also a nine.[13]

During the home visit, we attempted to assess the situation. Filing cabinets and boxes of the deceased's records were stored throughout various rooms, but the structural condition of the home made it impossible to enter some rooms. Approximately three cubic feet of personal correspondence and financial records were acquired during this visit. The rest of the files at the home were too damaged and, at that time, the Assistant University Archivist determined it was too costly to attempt to recover any more materials, both in terms of staff resources and costs to repair or clean materials.

In this instance, selection was based on authorship of the materials and their condition. These criteria were set by the University Archivist and the Assistant University Archivist after the initial visit to the home. Two main questions that were considered in acquisition were: "Were materials moldy?" and "Would an order have to be imposed?"

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http://208.88.128.33/hoarding/tests.aspx; Randy Frost, Gail Steketee, David F. Tolin, and Stefanie Renaud, "Development and Validation of the Clutter Image Rating," *Journal of Psychopathology and Behavioral Assessment* 30 (2008): 193-203.

[13] "Clutter Image Rating Scale," International OCD Foundation About Hoarding, Tests for Hoarding, accessed July 23, 2015, http://208.88.128.33/hoarding/tests.aspx.

In terms of staff labor, I spent 48 hours total organizing the office materials and transporting them to the Archives (six hours per week for eight weeks), excluding the time it took for arrangement and description. Once processed, the collection, including materials from both the office and home, encompassed 19.6 cubic feet and is currently available for public use.

Working with this first hoarded environment served as a valuable lesson. While entering this home, not only did we not properly protect ourselves with respirator masks and gloves, we were also not prepared to appraise materials efficiently. This hoard and the condition of the home were overwhelming and the Archives lacked a distinct process. The lessons learned from this case study were valuable and helped prepare us for the second case study.

Case Study Two

Case study two occurred from 2012-2013. Throughout 2012, the Assistant University Archivist negotiated the acquisition of the personal and professional papers of a prominent community member who died in late 2011. While the deceased was not employed by the University, he was an alumnus and his significant contributions to the field of library and information science made acquiring these papers important. In the fall of 2012, the estate executors and the Archives reached an agreement. At that time, the Assistant University Archivist and I were invited to the home to begin appraisal. The materials eventually accessioned, processed, and made available included: biographical materials; publications; subject files; undated notes; financial records; audio and visual materials; annotated books; artifacts; and computer media. Materials in this case study came from the home environment only; it was determined that the deceased worked mostly on home computers and did not have an outside office.

Appraising these materials was much more challenging compared to the first case study. While both homes were hoarded environments, the second had more materials spread throughout the house. Holes in both the floors and roof made some parts of the house inaccessible. Except for the attic, every room was filled with clutter. Small paths through the clutter led from room to room. Paper files, post-it notes, and computers and hardware were scattered throughout the home, which contained extensive damage (including

structural damage) from mold, pests, dirt, and extreme disorganization. The second home was larger, which meant more rooms to search and more potential materials to acquire. This home was a nine on the Clutter Image Rating Scale.[14] (See Image 1 for an example of clutter in the front room.) It is important to note that estate executors had already spent several hours cleaning and organizing half of the large living room before the picture was taken.

Image 1 (photograph by Roxanne Dunn, 2012)

The Assistant University Archivist and I began by receiving a tour from the estate executors and taking notes about which spaces in the hoard we believed warranted further exploration for historically important documents. One of the most interesting habits I learned was how the deceased created his records. This particular record creator worked at one area of the home, typically a desk with a

[14] "Clutter Image Rating Scale," International OCD Foundation About Hoarding, Tests for Hoarding, accessed July 23, 2015, http://208.88.128.33/hoarding/tests.aspx.

computer, and used that as a workstation until it became filled with materials. Once filled, the creator moved to another workstation until that became filled, and the cycle continued. The deceased used a bedroom area first and then moved to a basement desk. This information proved valuable to the Assistant University Archivist and I because it meant we could focus our time and resources on areas that the executors had determined were "desks." (See image 2 for the creator's basement work area.) In front of the monitor was a desk chair if debris had not been stacked on the floor in front of the monitor.

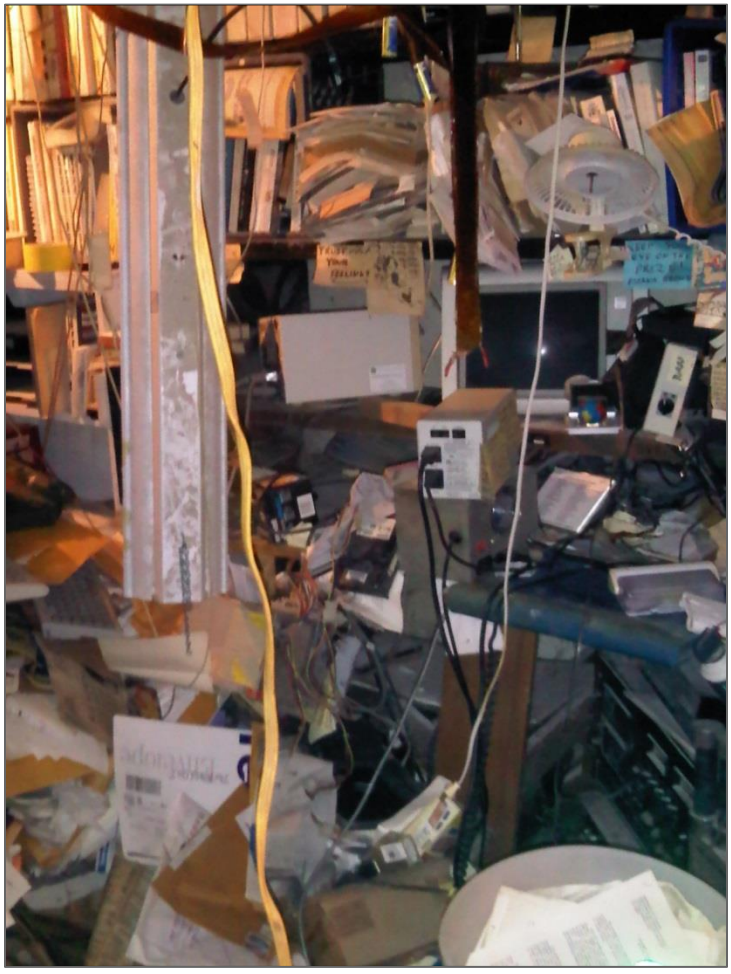

Image 2 (photograph by Roxanne Dunn, 2012)

The creator relied heavily on technology. While many of the materials were paper-based, there were also outdated hard drives, NeXT Computer Magneto-optical disks, and 8" and 5.25" floppy disks. Due to the severe lack of logical organization within the house, very poor condition of materials, and the Archives' time and staffing constraints, selection was limited to what the archivist determined the department could afford. Materials selected for acquisition from this hoard included paper correspondence, hard drives, optical and floppy disks, hundreds of post-it notes with messages, and public domain content for publication to the Web.

One of the most noticeable differences from the first case study was the creator's use of technology in his work. This presented a substantial challenge for the Archives as much was now obsolete. The Assistant University Archivist and I knew that he did most of his work on computers from the 1980s to the present. This led us to make sure to acquire every drive, computer, and disk we could locate. The Assistant University Archivist had arranged for the obsolete technology to be taken to the Digital Preservation Unit within the Library, where it was determined most of the drives would have to be sent to an external vendor to see if any usable information could be transferred.[15] This was arranged ahead of time and monies were allocated for this part of the project. The Digital Preservation Coordinator mentioned that the drives she received "looked mechanically okay, although they had a musty, moldy smell and were dusty." Because of the age of the drives and the fact that they were most likely subjected to rough treatment, the Digital Preservation Coordinator did not have much hope to recover information. In fact, only three of the nine hard drives submitted to the vendor were partially recovered at a cost of $3,500 to the University Library.[16] Many of the digital records recovered are made available for public use via the Archives' website. (See Image 3 for an example of some of the outdated technology.)

[15] Tracy Popp, Digital Preservation Coordinator, e-mail message to author, December 10, 2012.
[16] Ibid.

Image 3 (photograph by Roxanne Dunn, 2012)

This case study also differed from the first because we selected materials with mold damage. Once the materials in the house were identified as historically important, they were boxed in a separate area away from mold and dirt, wrapped in trash bags and driven directly to the Library's Conservation Lab and placed in a "dirty" freezer so as not to contaminate other collections. This was also arranged with the Conservation Lab ahead of time and monies were again allocated for mold remediation, completed by an external vendor due to limited staffing resources. Three cubic feet of materials with mold damage were sent to an external vendor, where the materials were frozen for two weeks, then thawed for one week. Then the vendors vacuumed each individual item and placed the materials in new folders and boxes. Because these items were not yet accessioned, the Conservation Lab weighed the materials before and after to make sure nothing was lost or stolen.[17] Upon return to the Archives, all the materials were properly accessioned. These were

[17] Cher Schneider, Juanita J. and Robert E. Simpson Senior Conservator, e-mail message to author, December 13, 2012.

eventually added into the collection, as none were damaged beyond repair, unlike some of the unrecoverable digital records.

In this scenario, the main appraisal criterion was set by the Assistant University Archivist before we entered the home. Knowing the importance of early technology to this creator and his work, the heaviest focus was on identifying and acquiring as many hard drives, optical disks, and computers as possible.

In terms of staff labor, we spent approximately 15 hours total selecting and transporting the materials from the house to the Archives and the Conservation Lab, excluding the time for arrangement and description and the vendors' time. Once processed, the collection encompassed 13.5 cubic feet and is currently available for public use, with some restrictions on personal correspondence.

Overall, the acquisition of materials in the second case study was better executed compared to the first. Having the guidance of the executors, better supplies for staff and the documents, and a plan made it possible to acquire these materials in an efficient and less stressful manner.

Steps Taken

After the experience with the first hoard in 2011, I wrote out a list of steps as a guide for acquiring materials from future hoards, created with the most ideal circumstances in mind. Obviously there will be times and instances which arise that will make completing these steps difficult or not possible. Some of these reasons could include donor circumstances, staff restrictions, and other limiting resources.

1. Initiate contact with the donor and/or estate.

This first step is similar to any other formal acquisition. Contact with a donor or estate executors must be made and an agreement reached about the timeline of the acquisition and the specifics of the deed of gift. This is also an important time to discuss privacy concerns.[18] In a hoard, because of the severe lack of organization on the part of the creator, materials of sensitive or personal nature can be uncovered that were never meant to be

[18] Laura A. Millar, *Archives Principles and Practices* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2010), 57.

donated. These materials may need to be restricted for a limited time or returned to the donor or executors. Also, it can be necessary to protect the donor in another way. Donors and executors may not want it known that the donor suffers from compulsive hoarding and archivists have an ethical obligation to respect this choice, much like any other personal health or medical information the donor did not want disclosed. Initial appraisal decisions should be taking place during this step. By identifying appropriate bodies of archival material to add to the holdings of the archival institution, archivists are ensuring that acquiring these materials will best serve both donors and researchers.[19]

2. Site visit and appraisal for selection (possibly first or only visit).

Paying close attention during the initial site visit can prove very helpful. If archivists are fortunate enough to have the donor or people who knew the donor and his/her habits well, much information can be gleaned and an overwhelming situation can become much more manageable. The donor and these informants can assist archivists to determine where best to spend limited time and resources. Appraisal for selection can then occur. Depending upon an institution's collecting policy the archivist needs to consider what should be preserved within the acquisition.[20] When archivists are in the field attempting to make these decisions, it can be a stressful process. Trying to make these initial decisions in a hoard only serves to add layers of stress and uncertainty.

It can be frustrating to attempt to appraise materials in a hoard when a donor or helpful executor is not available, as we learned in Case Study One. In these instances, archivists must rely on their appraisal knowledge and instincts, and conduct sufficient research beforehand to learn about the potential donor. Limitations including time, staffing, and lack of conservation resources may also influence appraisal decisions when donors cannot be present, as they did for us in Case Study One.

[19] Millar, 116–117.
[20] Laura A. Millar, *Archives Principles and Practices* (New York: Neal-Schuman, 2010), 116-117.

3. Triage- packing up and transporting materials chosen for selection (often combined with step 2).

This step is usually the most physically difficult. Archivists may have to work in subpar environmental conditions while attempting to make important retention decisions. In Case Study Two, rooms were very warm and made the environment unpleasant. It was important to watch where we stepped so as not to trip on piles of clutter, holes in the floor, loose wires, or extension cords plugged into outlets that were not visible. Dust and dirt contributed to uncomfortable breathing conditions. Using the supply list below will be useful to other archivists who face hoarded environments.

4. Send items to vendors or in-house departments for treatment/conservation.

Completing this step requires archivists to have access to conservation resources. In both case studies, some materials had to be left behind due to the Archives' inability to provide care for every single document that was historically important. In our current archival world of shrinking staff and supply budgets, this is not an uncommon reality. This is why an archivist's ability to select materials for acquisition quickly, based on condition and their institution's collecting policy, is crucial. If an archivist has access to such resources, it is imperative to separate materials that need conservation treatment from other materials and package them securely so as not to spread mold, dirt, or other debris into other parts of the collection.

5. Initial inventory of materials done at archives.

Once materials from the hoard have been cleared for mold, dirt, and debris they may be transported to the archives for an initial inventory. It is important not to forget about any materials that may still be with an outside vendor or another library department waiting cleaning and conservation treatments.

6. Begin arrangement and description.

At this time, the collection can be processed. Depending on policies, some archives may wait until all materials have been returned from outside vendors before beginning. Backlogs may also play a role in how quickly the collection is arranged and described

for research use.

Supply List

Below is a list of useful supplies, if not essential, to have when an archives or archivist is confronted with acquiring materials from a hoarded environment. Unsurprisingly, most are also recommended supplies for disaster preparedness. Many do not need to be purchased directly from archival supply sources; therefore, archivists can comparison shop for the lowest prices. It is also important to keep these supplies isolated and separate from other archival supplies so "dirty" supplies do not contaminate others.

Supplies for Staff

- 3M™ Particulate Respirator Masks N95. These do not have to be 3M brand specifically but should meet NIOSH[21] approved worker safety standards.
- Nitrile Gloves. Gloves will provide protection for staff when dealing with materials damaged by mold, fecal matter, dirt and other debris.
- Leather Gloves. Heavier leather gloves are necessary for digging through initial piles of debris.
- Access to either cell phone camera or digital camera. It is extremely helpful to document where particular materials come from within a hoarded environment. This documentation can often give contextual clues about the creator and their process. Documenting locations of materials can sometimes help with arranging materials and creating record series.
- Change of clothes. Staff should not return to work in the same clothes that were worn in a hoarded environment to minimize the risk of mold, dirt, or debris being transferred to other archival materials.

[21] NIOSH stands for The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, accessed October 22, 2015, http://www.cdc.gov/niosh/.

Supplies for Materials

- Plastic trash bags of varying sizes. Trash bags will contain and identify materials damaged by mold.
- Extra cardboard boxes of varying sizes. No materials from a hoard should be placed in archival boxes until they have all been inspected and found free of mold, dirt and other debris.
- Milk crates. If materials have been damaged by water and are currently wet, it is easy to stack materials in a milk crate turned sideways and place it directly in a freezer.
- Large black markers (similar to Sharpie brand) for identifying boxes. Materials taken from a hoard should be boxed and labeled clearly, with content and location listed briefly and clearly on the box.
- Plastic sheeting medium to heavy duty. This sheeting is useful for wrapping items that may not fit in a trash bag or boxes without lids. It is also useful for lining car seats or trunks while transporting materials.
- Duct tape. Duct tape is helpful for keeping boxes closed tightly during transportation.

Conclusion

Compulsive hoarding is a psychological disorder with devastating consequences not only for the collector, but for family members, friends, first responders, and even archivists. The two case studies presented represent my experience with acquiring historically important materials from severely hoarded environments. One of the intentions of this article was to make archivists aware that compulsive hoarding can have a great impact on how documents of historical importance are acquired. The second goal was to provide basic guidelines for archivists who face acquiring materials from a hoard. As modern television documentary series have shown, compulsive hoarding can be a debilitating and dangerous disorder. Being realistic and prepared when entering a hoarded environment will ease the tough burdens of appraisal and acquisition for archivists.

Roxanne Dunn, Special Collections and Archives Librarian at Kent Library, joined Southeast Missouri State

University in July of 2013 after graduating from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign with a master's degree in library and information science. She also earned a master's degree in journalism from the University of Illinois in 2005. About to begin her third year as a professional archivist in an academic library setting, Dunn has also served on the SNAP Roundtable Steering Committee during 2014- 2015. Dunn has presented original research on hoarding and its effect on acquisitions and appraisal in archives at two professional conferences. She also has previously volunteered for a books-to-prisoners program and considers library services to prisoners amongst her professional interests.